

## **Taking the Private Public**

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1991

*January 8, 1982*

*I entered the bathroom and locked the door. The mirror over the bathroom sink reflected the agony and despair in my face.*

Although I was gainfully employed as a financial analyst, I envied the courage and determination of the artist whose reception I had just been to. It reminded me of a dream that I had given up on. Now the pain of that loss made me feel bad about myself. Looking in the mirror, I promised myself that I would sketch a self-portrait every day for a year, no matter where I was or what I was doing.

Without realizing it, the decision to set aside daily drawing time was the beginning of a search for myself. During the nine months that I sketched, many questions began to surface. In an effort to give them some form, I began to make quick sketches of family members from snapshots. Each time I pulled out the family album, however, heavy walls of fog blanked my mind, making me feel sleepy and exhausted. At that time, I did not know it, but that wall of resistance would become a wall of terror that I would have to push against in order to do creative work.

Now as I looked at the snapshots, they seemed to have no relationship to the reality of my childhood. In typical home outdoor shots, everyone is smiling at the camera in the backyard, on the front steps, in front of the car, in the Sunday best.

Now as I looked at the snapshots, they reminded me of how our bonds of affection had been laced with barbs of conflict and violence. In an effort to work through the vague and uneasy recollections, I began to write and rewrite memories while shooting, reprinting and collaging the old photographs. While trying to focus on pleasant memories, forgotten childhood experiences- many of which were frightening and taboo- began to re-emerge. The writings took on a life of their own. The snapshots sucked me into the frame and transported me to another time and place.

As I worked, I grappled with the shadows of anger, confusion and guilt which hovered over me. I did not know it, but I was to begin a passage through the "shadow areas" of my life. And I did not want to make the trip.

*April 27, 1984*

*Funny, I never had all the contact printing problems I am having now. The dark brown and beige overtones are dirty looking. The image quality is good, but the chemical looks a sickly dark, dull brown.*

The photographs are printed on a heavy etching paper coated with Van Dyke brown light-sensitive chemicals. They are newly framed memory pictures from my distant past. It is clear that they are reconstructions. Still, I felt guarded about showing them. Embarrassment and guilt about "betraying family secrets" made me feel like I was being "bad."

Could the viewers be non judgmental? Would they think my experiences had been tough only because I had been poor and Black? I wanted them to recognize that the particular and peculiar experiences of this girl should be part of the landscape of children's stories. I wanted them to understand that there were other lives outside of their personal experiences.

*May 18, 1984*

*New York City. The time for the opening reception has come. I am terrified, but I know I am supposed to act like I am cool. I gulp down two glasses of wine in a frantic effort to relax myself. Several people ask me if they were true stories. When I answered yes, one person responded, "How sad!"*

Perhaps it's odd, but I had never considered those hard times as sad times. In the semi-rural area where we lived, we had also had lots of fun.

*A young couple thanked me for sharing stories. "They make us feel less alone about our own lives," they said.*

I sighed with relief that at least one other person could understand. Several others began to tell me stories they had kept secret all their lives. I was not prepared to become their confidante. I felt uneasy. I did not know what to say. This was in the early eighties. This was when people did not talk about incest. If it happened to you, it was something to forget.

In 1987, I was finally able to show my work to my family. Their responses ranged from silence, to curiosity, to denial and anger. The best part of it was having some of my siblings share similar experiences with me.

*September 30, 1989*

*Now as I go back to bring the past into the present, and take the private public, I see that many of the things that seemed so terrible back then were not as hard as having to bear them in isolation. That secrecy became a big part of the way that I could feel bad about myself.*

Much later, I began to understand how shame and embarrassment and fear of being avoided and becoming isolated keeps us quiet and apart. Once we internalize these oppressions, public hatred, disgrace and ridicule become tools used to keep us in our place.

Today, I just assume people have seen my work that it is a big part of the reason that they want to get to know me. I no longer avoid people who have negative responses. Since I feel that I don't have as much to hide, I am not as terrified. It is easier for me to see the ways in which they might have become restimulated.

It is hard work to cut away illusions about our lives. All the behavior patterns that I learned in order to survive way back then are still trying to make me behave. Often when I open my mouth to speak about the past, I feel like I am going to be slapped down by the big, invisible hand of God.

Each time I actually manage to speak, I get another glimpse into how I gave up my real self and my awareness of my brilliance, my beauty, my power, and the right to expect that everyone would want to love and connect with me.

As I make visible, understand, forgive and heal the pain and hurt that I got just because I was me, I become more able to relax and reclaim pride and joy in who I am. I regain my power and freedom as the healing occurs.

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